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The role of libraries in scholarly communication | Martin Wolf



Untying knots and joining dots: the role of librarians in the scholarly communication environment

Based on a paper presented at the UKSG One-Day Conference, 'Untying the knots and joining the dots: researchers' needs from funding to outputs and beyond', London, November 2014

This opinion piece on the role of libraries in the scholarly communication environment covers the following issues: the notion of librarians as the proxies and 'middleware' of the scholarly communications landscape; the need for librarians to be willing to adapt their practices in order to ease some of the complexities inherent in research communications; a plea for publishers to provide simpler, more straightforward and transparent subscription and open access (OA) offers to libraries; and some thoughts on where rapid developments in digital technologies might lead the information professions.

Introduction

The title of this article is taken from the overall name of UKSG's November 2014 one-day conference on researchers' needs from funding to outputs and beyond. [Recordings of all presentations are available online¹.] I was tasked with providing a librarian's perspective on these issues, and this present piece provides some 'edited highlights' of the issues I covered.

The notion of untying knots and joining dots was an apt metaphor for an examination of how the work of librarians contributes to the scholarly communication landscape, given that the array of options available to the library profession as it evolves is at times almost bewildering. It is as if we are beginning to complete a 'join-the-dots' puzzle where we don't know what the final picture will be, only with the added complication of none of the dots being numbered, so we don't know where next to draw our line and we risk tying ourselves up in knots.



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Librarians as the proxies and 'middleware' of the research communications landscape

It often strikes me that the librarian's place in the scholarly communications space is that of the middleware linking together the other stakeholders. I feel as if librarians are perhaps the only stakeholders with a better than average understanding of the perspective, practices and policies of the majority of the other players in research publication. For instance, as librarians, we are often called on to explain publisher policies and funder policies to researchers, to explain publisher practices and policies to research administrators, to explain to publishers the levels of awareness of, say, open access (OA) amongst our researchers, and so on. Our role is to understand, and in some cases influence, the perspectives of the other links in the chain, while ensuring our own services help the smooth flow of information through it. In other words, it could be said that librarians are maybe *at the centre* of information flow (both 'produced' information such as articles, books, etc., and 'workflow' information such as publisher policies, funder mandates, etc.), but not necessarily *central* to those information flows.

To give some specific examples, I have often found that academic researchers have only very rudimentary knowledge about traditional publisher practices and policies. This is particularly true of the common researcher's approach to publication agreements or copyright transfer agreements, which is not to read them, or at best give them a cursory glance. I have personal experience of researchers telling me that they have not read article publication agreements before signing them, and then being affronted by the restrictions that are placed on their use of that work. This points to one of the ways in which the scholarly communications landscape, and the librarian's role within it, is changing – to a greater extent, librarians are now advising, or at least informing, researchers with regard to the dissemination of their work, rather than focusing solely on ensuring that researchers have access to the work of others.

A similar situation arises when discussing funder policies. Like many librarians, I have delivered OA roadshows and presentations where I have outlined policies such as the RCUK policy, the Wellcome Trust (now COAF) OA policy and, more recently, the funding councils' policy on OA and the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). In this way, librarians are effectively acting as proxies for the funders, in that they are explaining and, in the face of often hostile reactions, having to provide justifications for policies with which they themselves might actually disagree. This has led to me being asked questions such as 'What is 'date of acceptance'? What does that mean?' – even something as apparently straightforward as identifying an article's date of acceptance can be problematic (and it is worth noting that HEFCE specifically chose 'date of acceptance' as the cornerstone of their OA policy as they felt this date would be unambiguous). In our role as the on-campus proxies for publishers and funders, librarians are therefore at the heart of a new examination of the whole process of scholarly communications, raising questions as never before about both how academic publishing has worked in the past and how it might work in the future.

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Complexity and conservatism – creating it, dealing with it

It is a given that the scholarly communications landscape is becoming increasingly complicated, with a greater variety of competing mandates and publishing models than ever before. One concern I have is that sometimes it can be librarians themselves who contribute to this level of complexity. I feel that as a profession, we should be more forthright in choosing a course of action and sticking to it, rather than constantly second-guessing ourselves and tying ourselves in knots as we grapple with conflicting publisher and funder policies on OA and academic ignorance of, and/or indifference to, these issues.

There is perhaps an innate conservatism amongst librarians, or at least a very strong drive to always check every possible interpretation of a rule or a policy, that can sometimes make issues more complex or problematic than they need be. An example of this can be our efforts to reconcile priorities around OA, research evaluation and publisher policies, such as worrying about whether or not to make an important REF-submitted item available through an OA repository when it is impossible to find the publisher's policy on OA. While the desire to always do the right thing is laudable, in cases like this I would advocate a far more pragmatic approach of simply making the work openly accessible and then dealing with any potential fallout at a later date. I am not claiming that we should ignore complexity or simply ride roughshod over policies with which we may not agree, but given that so much of what we deal with *is* of a very complex nature, when we encounter a situation that can be resolved in a straightforward manner then we should do so, and be prepared to deal with a certain level of risk. In this case, for example, the risk is of receiving a takedown request – a perfectly acceptable risk, and one that can be dealt with correctly if such a request were received.

'... be prepared to deal with a certain level of risk.'

At risk of twisting my own argument through a 180° shift, it is also worth noting that some publishing options presented as making life for librarians and their

80 institutions easier have their own hidden complications. The example I would give (an example given in the knowledge I am probably in a minority to be concerned about this) is that of OA pre-payment options. While on the surface these appear to cut down levels of administration and bureaucracy, when combined with the requirement to report back to research funders on 'their share' of article processing charges (APCs), things can become quite difficult. For example, if an institution has separate OA funds from RCUK, COAF, internal sources, and so on, how can pre-payments cope with APCs for articles reporting on research which is 40% Wellcome Trust funded, 40% MRC funded and 20% NIHR funded? How do you conform to the REF policy on OA when one aspect – the requirement for deposition of papers at point of acceptance – effectively destroys any system that could help monitor compliance?

These issues point to the need for librarians, publishers and funders all to agree to allowing a strong degree of flexibility in dealing with these issues, and to working on solutions together. Sometimes in the face of complexity we should be confident enough to take an approach some stakeholders might see as sub-optimal in order to achieve sensible solutions.

What should librarians want from publishers?

One of the more talked-about aspects of the original conference presentation – and certainly the most misunderstood – was the analogy I drew between the larger academic publishers (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer, etc.) and the major supermarket chains in the UK (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, etc.). In both cases, these companies are the leading players in their respective fields, and will continue to be the major players for some time yet. However, as is often reported in the media, the larger supermarket chains are losing market share to the discount retailers, Aldi and Lidl. What makes these alternatives so attractive is that they have one very clear, simple, transparent aspect to their offer – they are cheap, *and that's it*. These stores do not offer all the extras (i.e. extra complexity) of loyalty cards, of price comparison leading to money off your next purchase, and so on, that are offered by the larger supermarkets.

From my perspective, I would like publishers to be more like Lidl and less like Tesco. This does *not*, as some have thought, mean that I think publisher offerings should always be very cheap, nor that price is more important than quality. It means that in terms of pricing structures, and sometimes in terms of the often unnecessary bells and whistles of publisher platforms, I want to see a move to simpler, more transparent offers. I feel there are perhaps too many unneeded complications – sliding scale this, core-subscribed and non-subscribed titles that, extra payment to acquire APC discounts the other; additional features like note taking, super advanced search functionality and so on that are offered with little evidence of their use. A move to a simpler, more transparent offer like that of the discount supermarkets would bring some welcome clarity to the negotiations between librarians and publishers.

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Outside influences – how technology may radically change the scholarly publishing landscape

While the rest of this article discusses my opinions on known issues and problems, this section addresses the unknowable, namely the ways in which rapid advances in digital technology, in particular in artificial intelligence, might affect the world of research information discovery and use.

These thoughts were prompted by considering the intended audience for scholarly communications and how, particularly in the STEM subjects, it is likely that increasingly, that audience will contain non-human elements. Although concerns about information overload have been present at least since the invention of the telegraph, it does feel that some disciplines are now reaching a tipping point where even the most thorough researcher cannot possibly hope to read all the papers in their subject. If we are to

avoid drowning in the data deluge and inadvertently missing important links between disparate discoveries, we will probably become ever more reliant on digital agents to find, synthesize, summarize, and maybe even repackage the outputs of scholarly research for us.

This is not simply idle speculation. Earlier in 2014, a venture capital company appointed a piece of computer software to its board of directors². This algorithm sifts through huge amounts of data to decide in which age-related medical technologies its company should invest. How might developments such as these affect scholarly communications? Might algorithms perform a similar role in determining which research projects should receive funding? Might they help inform decisions on which publications outlets and formats would achieve most impact?

'... a venture capital company appointed a piece of computer software to its board of directors.'

Perhaps of more immediate relevance to the work of librarians, what impacts might we see on library- and vendor-supplied discovery systems? If software advances to the point where it can categorize information quickly enough and accurately enough that it could be argued there is no need for database- or catalogue-based discovery systems, in what ways would the roles of publishers and librarians shift?

Whilst I have no desire to see librarians clutching their P45s (letters of termination) while huddled around a single-bar electric fire (as one very funny description of the original talk put it), nor to see an end to innovations in information discovery, I think this does point to a need for librarians, publishers, researchers and funders to be prepared for some seismic shifts to what now appears a rapidly aging traditional way of doing things.

'... be prepared for some seismic shifts'

Conclusion

This opinion piece has explored some of my personal musings on the issues facing the major stakeholders in the scholarly communication environment. In summary, it is my belief that, as librarians, we are currently right at the middle of this particular web of relationships, understanding and explaining the perspectives of the various stakeholders to each other, but that we perhaps run the risk of confusing being at the centre of those communications with being central to those communications. The profession needs to be flexible, able to adapt to the changes that will come, whether they be in turning the library inside out (i.e. focusing on exposing our institutions' content to the rest of the world, rather than ensuring access to the rest of the world's content for our institutions) or in embracing new ways of providing access to the world's information (even if that may mean putting aside our own traditional tools for doing so). We need to stop requesting added frills in publisher products that may excite us but be of limited value to our user communities, and we must be prepared to deal with the changes that technological developments will create for us.

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